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P 051104Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4520
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0845
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9621
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4135
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1593
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3315
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6716
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4330
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0724
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0725
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0370
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2658
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0301
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000612

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PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [BM](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BORDERS OVER DEMOCRACY: INDIAN AMBASSADOR TO BURMA

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Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Indian Ambassador dropped by May 4 to chat with Charge. He offered insights into how India views its relationship with Burma: by and large a friendly neighbor in comparison to Pakistan, Bangladesh, or China. While he agrees that political reform is needed and will come eventually, he sees no point in raising the subject with senior regime leaders since they won't listen. In the meantime, India will concentrate on trade relations, including growing military sales. End Summary

Border Concerns Paramount

¶2. (C) Ambassador Bhaskar Kumar Mitra met with Charge May 4 to exchange views on Burma. He described India's relations with Burma as friendly, noting that China had never been able to pit Burma against India, as the Chinese had done with the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and tried with the Bhutanese. He described military cooperation along the shared border as a one-way street, with the Burmese military taking action against Naga insurgents fighting against the Indian central government. He noted that Pakistan and Bangladesh had supported anti-Indian insurgents, unlike Burma. He also pointed out that ethnic Kachins in Burma, in areas far from central government control, sometimes permitted Indian insurgents to stay in their territory in return for rent.

¶3. (C) When Charge asked if India assisted Burma in actions against anti-regime insurgents, Mitra implied that this has never been seriously pursued. He said that the Burmese who came into India were pro-democracy activists, and that the Indians had told the Burmese military that they represented no military threat. He added that the previous Defense

Minister Fernandes had given some of these pro-democracy activists refuge in his own home. Economic migrants from Burma do not try to enter India, according to Mitra, because they can see for themselves that they are better off in Burma than in one of the poorest parts of India. Burmese migrants have many better opportunities in Thailand, he concluded.

We Don't Say Anything Because They Don't Listen

¶4. (C) Charge asked why India did not speak out about the political situation now that others in the region have. Mitra matter of factly responded that there was "no point because they don't listen." "They" it became clear was Senior General Than Shwe. He cited the recent visit of the Indonesian President as proof. When President Yudhoyono mentioned Indonesia's own democratic transition, according to Mitra, Than Shwe abruptly cut short the meeting.

¶5. (C) Mitra described Than Shwe as more confident in his position now than previously, drawing on his previous assignment here as DCM in the early 1990s. Than Shwe has effectively surrounded himself with people loyal to him and has pushed aside those who never hesitated to question or debate in the past. The loyalists he has installed as ministers or in senior military positions will not speak up because they are afraid for their own positions. During recent meetings, even dinners, Mitra has been in, the ministers and subordinate generals sit rigidly staring straight ahead. Than Shwe is not completely out of touch, according to Mitra, and recognizes that he could not control Rangoon in the event of a public uprising. For that reason, he ordered the military and civil servants to move to Pyinmana so that they could not join any protests as happened in 1988.

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¶6. (C) Mitra said change will come: "It can happen in ten years or tomorrow." India fears chaos on its borders, especially if change results in a chain of ethnic mini-states along India's border. He noted that Burma's ethnic minorities have long struggled for greater autonomy since independence, and they have funds from narcotics trafficking to buy weapons. India's preferred scenario for change would be a smooth transition from Than Shwe to his number two, Maung Aye. While Vice Senior General Maung Aye might be fond of "drink and karaoke," according to Mitra, he is "educated and clean." He disparaged the limited education of Than Shwe, and implied his wife was barely literate. He described Defense Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Thura Shwe Mann, whom many observers see as the most obvious heir apparent, as "not ready and corrupt" like his mentor, Than Shwe. With Maung Aye "reform will happen," asserted Mitra. When Charge mentioned that Maung Aye appeared marginalized now, Mitra expressed confidence that he was just biding his time and retained significant support among the regional military commanders.

¶7. (C) Mitra asked if we believed the military would tighten restrictions against the National League for Democracy (NLD) as the Information Minister intimated on April 26. Charge replied that there is not much left to tighten, with all but the Rangoon office shut down, its leaders detained, and signs of increased pressure on members to resign. Mitra acknowledged that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD retain broad popular support. He noted that NLD won 90 percent of the vote at the military base in Mandalay in 1990. He predicted that NLD would also win a sizeable majority today if a free and fair vote were held, even though its ranks have been decimated by imprisonment, exile and death. Nevertheless, he doubted the military would repeat the mistakes of 1990 when they really believed that candidates they could work with would win. Instead, he predicted that the regime would continue the National Convention and ultimately stage a "fixed" referendum. Asked if India would speak out against

that, Mitra smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Then he said that India wants to see all of its neighbors become more democratic, that India is proud of its successful democracy, but understands that other countries must find their own paths to democracy.

Commercial Focus

18. (C) Charge noted that commercial relations seemed to be on the rise and asked if Indians were investing in Burma. "No, the climate is not right," Mitra replied. He said that India has been extending soft loans to facilitate trade, as done with its other neighbors. Asked if he expected repayment, he replied "certainly, it is a matter of face for those countries." (Note: we have heard that most creditors, including the Chinese, have had problems. End note). India primarily imports timber and lentils from Burma; "we're their largest market," claimed Mitra. He asserted very little smuggling takes place because of the remoteness of both sides of the border from the center. He said only about 2-3 percent of trade with India takes place across the land border, almost all goes by sea, which makes it easier to monitor. He also said that Maung Aye, since the removal of Khin Nyunt in 2004, had tightened control of the borders to raise more revenue for the center. As an example, he claimed that the Burmese have shot at Chinese smugglers elsewhere.

Comment

19. (C) Mitra made it clear that India's interest in Burma has to do primarily with its borders, but commercial interests

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matter too. He deflected discussion of growing mil-mil ties, but reports of military visitors traveling in both directions and sales of military equipment have picked up significantly in the past year. While philosophically sympathetic to the pro-democracy movement, India will not jeopardize its immediate interests to become a more forceful advocate of democracy in Burma. He did not offer his usual excuse that India has to engage Burma to check China. Nevertheless, that particular concern clearly factors into border concerns more broadly. This puts Burma in the advantageous position of being able to play its two huge neighbors off of each other. Both need Burma's resources, especially oil and gas, to fuel their booming economies. China has had a big head start, but its pervasive trade presence has caused rising resentment among the xenophobic Burmese. Mitra's support of Maung Aye plays into this game, since he reportedly is pro-Indian and anti-Chinese. So better the devil (general) India knows..(

VILLAROSA